

SOUPS AND SALADS

Soups are an integral part of most Mexican meals, and some may be served as a brothy or creamy first course. Many soups, however, are commonly served as one-pot meals, such as the pozole in this chapter. Salads of lettuce and tomatoes are not a traditional part of Mexican cuisine; but, salads with regional ingredients, such as nopales and watercress, are not uncommon and can add refreshing flavors and textures to many Mexican meals.

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TORTILLA SOUP



EPAZOTE

Considered a tenacious weed by many gardeners, pungent epazote (also called wormseed)

is looked on as a culinary treasure by Mexican cooks. The herb grows easily in almost all climates, so look for seeds in garden stores or catalogs and for seedlings in nurseries. Note that epazote will spread easily if the clusters of ripe seeds are not cut off. Ideally, epazote is used fresh, but dried epazote, stocked in Mexican markets, can be used in beans and soups.

Enclose about 1 teaspoon in a tea ball for easy removal of the woody stems. If using fresh epazote, add it toward the end of cooking.

In a blender or food processor, process the tomatoes, onion, and garlic until smooth, adding a small amount of the chicken stock if the mixture is too dry. In a Dutch oven or large *cazuela* or saucepan over medium-high heat, heat the oil until it is shimmering but not smoking. Pour in the tomato mixture all at once and fry, stirring frequently, until it thickens and darkens, about 4 minutes.

Add the stock and bring to a boil. Season to taste with sea salt, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the epazote and continue to simmer for another 5 minutes.

To prepare the condiments, heat the oil in a small frying pan over medium heat. Add the chiles and fry quickly until crisp, about 1 minute. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the chiles to paper towels to drain, then pat them with more paper towels to absorb the excess oil.

When ready to serve, remove the epazote sprigs from the soup. Put equal amounts of the tortilla strips and cheese in the bottom of each warmed bowl. Ladle in the hot soup and top with the fried chiles and the avocado. Serve at once.

Notes: To make the tortilla strips or squares, follow the instructions on page 10 for tortilla chips, using only 9 tortillas and cutting them into strips 1 inch (2.5 cm) long by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) wide or into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (12-mm) squares instead of wedges. Fry as directed and let cool before using. Queso Chihuahua is a very flavorful Mexican cheese, but it may be difficult to find. A melting cheese such as Muenster is a good substitute for this recipe.

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

3 field-ripe tomatoes, or
1 can (14½ oz/455 g) diced tomatoes, drained

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (2 oz/60 g) coarsely chopped white onion

2 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped

6 cups (48 fl oz/1.5 l) chicken stock (page 110) or prepared low-sodium broth

1 tablespoon canola or corn oil

Sea salt

4 large fresh epazote sprigs

FOR THE CONDIMENTS:

1 tablespoon canola or safflower oil

2 pasilla chiles, seeded (page 108) and cut into small squares or strips

Tortilla strips or squares (see Notes)

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb (250 g) queso Chihuahua (see Notes) or Muenster cheese, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch (6-mm) cubes

1 ripe Hass avocado, pitted and peeled (page 10), then diced



POZOLE VERDE

½ lb (250 g) pork neck bones, ordered in advance from the butcher and rinsed

8 cups (64 fl oz/2 l) chicken stock (page 110)

1 lb (500 g) boneless pork shoulder

½ white onion, plus ¼ white onion, coarsely chopped

3 cloves garlic, halved

Sea salt

3 lb (1.5 kg) packaged partially cooked pozole (far right) or nixtamal

4 serrano chiles

1 lb (500 g) tomatillos, husked and rinsed (page 17)

2 romaine (cos) lettuce leaves, torn into large pieces

3 radish leaves

2 cups (10 oz/315 g) raw hulled green pumpkin seeds

2 tablespoons canola oil

2 fresh epazote sprigs or flat-leaf (Italian) parsley sprigs

Small bowls of finely shredded cabbage, finely chopped white onion, thinly sliced radishes, and dried oregano for serving

8 lime quarters for serving

Put the pork bones, stock, pork shoulder, ½ onion, garlic, and 1½ teaspoons sea salt in a large pot. Bring to a boil over high heat, skimming off any foam from the surface. Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover partially, and cook until the meat is tender, about 2 hours. After about 1 hour, add the *pozole*, stir well, and continue cooking. Meanwhile, bring a saucepan three-fourths full of water to a boil over high heat, add the chiles and tomatillos, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until the tomatillos are soft, about 10 minutes. Drain through a sieve. Working in 2 batches, spoon half of the tomatillo mixture into a blender and add half each of the remaining chopped onion, the lettuce and radish leaves, and 1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) of the pork broth. Process until smooth. Pour into a bowl and repeat for the second batch. Set aside.

In a frying pan over medium heat, toast the pumpkin seeds, shaking the pan frequently, just until they swell and begin to tan, about 4 minutes. Remove from the heat, let cool, then grind in a spice grinder. In a large frying pan over medium-high heat, heat the oil. Add the ground seeds and fry, stirring frequently, until pastelike, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomatillo purée, reduce the heat to medium-low, and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until thick and rich, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat.

Remove the pork and bones from the pot and let cool. Stir some of the remaining pork broth into the seed mixture. Pass the mixture through a medium-mesh sieve placed over the pot, pressing on the contents with the back of a spoon. Bring to a simmer over medium heat and cook for 30 minutes. Shred the pork and add it to the pot along with any meat from the bones. Discard the bones. Add the epazote and 2 teaspoons sea salt, stir well, and simmer for 20–30 minutes longer. Ladle the pozole into bowls and serve with the cabbage, finely chopped onion, radishes, oregano, and limes.

MAKES 8–10 SERVINGS



POZOLE

Corn, the very heart and soul of Mexican cooking, becomes something quite different when it is transformed into pozole, also known as hominy. Large, white corn kernels are treated with a softening solution of lime (calcium hydroxide), just as they are for making *masa* (page 35), but the kernels, rather than being ground, are cooked until tender. Look for packaged partially cooked pozole (*nixtamal*) at Mexican markets. You can substitute the pozole in this recipe with 4 cans (15 oz/470 g each) drained and rinsed white hominy. Add it to the soup along with the pumpkin seed mixture.



BLACK BEAN SOUP



BLACK BEANS

Beans are one of the most common foods of the Mexican people, and seldom a day goes by without a person eating them at least once. They come in a virtual kaleidoscope of earthy colors, especially in the central and northern parts of Mexico, but in the south, tiny black beans are simply cooked in a pot with onion and epazote or avocado leaves to add flavor. Always buy dried beans from a store with high turnover so that they are as fresh as possible and need the least amount of cooking time.

Pick over the beans and discard any broken beans or grit. Rinse the beans well, place in a large pot, and add 8 cups (64 fl oz/2 l) hot water. The water should cover the beans by at least 1 inch (2.5 cm). Add the onion, garlic, and lard and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium, cover partially, and cook until tender, 2–4 hours. The timing will depend on the age of the beans. If using epazote rather than cilantro, add it now along with 2 teaspoons sea salt and continue to cook until the beans are soft, about 30 minutes longer. Add more hot water if needed to keep the level of the water at least 1 inch (2.5 cm) above the beans. Remove from the heat and let cool slightly.

Working in batches, transfer the beans to a blender, add the chiles, and process until velvety, adding a bit more liquid, if necessary, to thin to a medium consistency. Pour the purée back into the pot, and season to taste with sea salt. If using cilantro, add it now. Reheat over medium-low heat.

While the soup is heating, prepare the green onions. Cut off the root end of each green onion and leave about 2 inches (5 cm) of the green tops. In a frying pan over medium-high heat, warm the oil. Add the green onions and fry until browned on all sides, about 4 minutes. Remove from the heat and, when cool enough to handle, remove any tough outer layers of skin, slice into rounds, place in a bowl, and toss with a little sea salt.

Ladle the hot soup into warmed deep bowls. Top each serving with a swirl of *crema* and a sprinkling of the green onion slices.

Note: If your grill is fired up, you can brush the green onions with the oil and grill them over a hot fire (page 78).

Make-Ahead Tip: This soup can be made a day in advance and then reheated, adding more bean broth or water, if needed.

MAKES 6–8 SERVINGS

2 cups (14 oz/440 g) dried small black beans

½ white onion, quartered

4 large cloves garlic

1 tablespoon fresh pork lard (page 114), rendered bacon fat, or canola or safflower oil

3 large fresh epazote sprigs (optional) or fresh cilantro (fresh coriander) sprigs

Sea salt

2 canned chiles chipotles en adobo, coarsely chopped

8 plump green (spring) onions

2 tablespoons canola or safflower oil

1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) *crema* (page 51)



CREAMY POBLANO CHILE SOUP WITH CORN AND MUSHROOMS

1 tablespoon canola or safflower oil

1 white onion, coarsely chopped

2 cloves garlic

2 cups (12 oz/370 g) fresh or frozen corn kernels

3 poblano chiles, roasted, peeled, and seeded (page 106), then coarsely chopped

4 cups (32 fl oz/1 l) chicken stock (page 110) or prepared low-sodium broth

½ teaspoon dried oregano, preferably Mexican

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

½ lb (250 g) fresh chanterelle or other flavorful mushrooms such as cremini, brushed clean, trimmed, and sliced

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) *crema* (far right), thinned with milk

3 oz (90 g) Muenster cheese or farmers' cheese (see Note), cut into ¼-inch (6-mm) cubes, at room temperature

In a Dutch oven, *cazuela*, or other large pot over medium-low heat, heat the oil. Add the onion and sauté until golden and soft, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute longer. Raise the heat to medium and add 1 cup (6 oz/185 g) of the corn, half of the chiles, and 1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) of the chicken stock. Bring to a simmer, stir in the oregano, and cook, uncovered, until the corn is tender, 10–15 minutes. Remove from the heat and let cool slightly.

Ladle the corn mixture into a blender with ½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) of the remaining chicken stock and process until smooth. Pass the mixture through a medium-mesh sieve back into the pot. Add the remaining stock and bring to a simmer over medium-low heat.

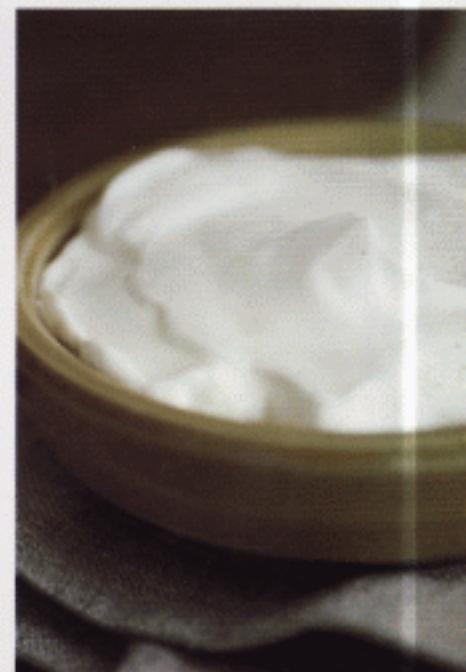
While the soup is heating, in a frying pan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the remaining poblano chiles, the remaining corn, and the mushrooms and stir well. Season to taste with sea salt and pepper and sauté until the mushrooms release their liquid and then the liquid evaporates, about 8 minutes (this may take longer if you are using cremini).

Add the mushroom mixture and the *crema* to the soup, stir well, cover, and simmer for 10 minutes to blend the flavors. Taste and adjust the seasoning with sea salt and pepper.

Ladle the soup into warmed bowls and garnish with the cheese. Serve at once.

Note: Farmers' cheese is a white, crumbly, fresh form of cottage cheese from which most of the liquid has been removed. It is sold in a fairly solid loaf shape and is mild and slightly tangy. It is a nice alternative to Muenster cheese, which is more of a melting cheese, for this soup.

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

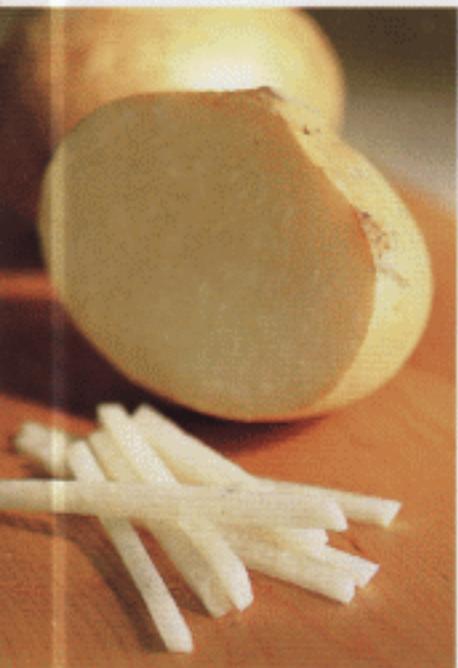


MEXICAN CREMA

Crema is a thick, slightly sour cream sold in Mexican markets. Crème fraîche, its French counterpart, is carried in some stores and can be substituted, or you can make your own *crema*: Mix 1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) heavy (double) cream (not ultrapasteurized) with 1 tablespoon buttermilk or plain yogurt with active cultures. Cover with plastic wrap, poke a few holes in the surface, and place in a warm spot (about 85°F/30°C) until thickened and set, 8–24 hours. Stir, cover, and refrigerate until chilled and firm before using or for up to 1 week.



WATERCRESS SALAD WITH ORANGE, JICAMA, AND AVOCADO



JICAMA

A member of the large legume family, the crunchy, ivory-fleshed, brown-skinned jicama is a tuber used throughout Mexico, its country of origin. Jicama has a bland taste that benefits from being marinated raw in lime juice or from being combined with fruits or vegetables. Looking somewhat like drab turnips, jicamas can range in size from 5 oz (155 g) up to 5 lb (2.5 kg). At their best, they have a juicy, crisp flesh and a fairly thin skin. Before using, peel away the skin and the fibrous layer beneath it with a sharp knife.

In a small bowl, whisk together the lime juice, chile, 1 teaspoon sea salt, and pepper to taste. Pour in the oil in a thin, steady stream while whisking constantly until thoroughly emulsified, forming a vinaigrette. Set aside.

Working with 1 orange at a time, cut a slice off the top and the bottom to reveal the flesh. Place the orange upright on the cutting board and, using a sharp knife, cut down along the sides, removing all the white pith and membrane. Cut the orange in half vertically then cut each half crosswise into slices $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) thick. Repeat with the remaining orange. Place in a bowl, add the watercress and jicama, and toss to mix.

Just before serving, drizzle the vinaigrette over the watercress mixture, then carefully fold in the avocado slices. Taste and adjust the seasoning with sea salt. Serve at once.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (3 fl oz/80 ml) fresh lime juice, strained (about 2 limes)

1 serrano chile, thinly sliced

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) extra-virgin olive oil

2 navel oranges

2 bunches watercress, about $\frac{1}{2}$ lb (250 g) total weight, large stems removed

1 small jicama, about $\frac{3}{4}$ lb (375 g), peeled (far left) and finely julienned

1 ripe Hass avocado, pitted and peeled (page 10), then sliced lengthwise



NOPALES SALAD

2 tablespoons canola oil

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 lb (500 g) *nopales* (3 or 4), cleaned (far right) and cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch (6-mm) pieces

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1½ oz/45 g) finely chopped white onion

2 jalapeño or serrano chiles, thinly sliced crosswise

Sea salt

FOR THE DRESSING:

1 teaspoon dried oregano, preferably Mexican

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon Dijon mustard

2 tablespoons each cider vinegar and canola oil

Sea salt

Pinch of sugar

$\frac{3}{4}$ lb (375 g) ripe tomatoes, diced

5 green (spring) onions, thinly sliced, including tender green parts

4–5 tablespoons (½ oz/10 g) finely minced fresh cilantro (fresh coriander)

6 inner leaves from 1 head romaine (cos) lettuce

$\frac{1}{4}$ lb (125 g) *queso fresco* or mild feta cheese, crumbled

To cook the *nopales*, in a large, heavy frying pan or wide saucepan over medium heat, heat the oil. Add the garlic and fry for several seconds until fragrant. Stir in the *nopales*, onion, and chiles, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the cactus is almost tender, about 15 minutes. The cactus will give off a sticky substance, but most of it will disappear with longer cooking. Uncover and continue to cook until the sticky residue has dried up, about 15 minutes longer. Season to taste with sea salt.

While the *nopales* are cooking, make the dressing. In a small bowl, whisk together the oregano, mustard, and vinegar. Whisk in the oil, $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon sea salt, and the sugar.

Place the warm *nopales* in a bowl. Quickly whisk the dressing to recombine, then pour over the *nopales*. Toss to coat. Add the tomatoes and green onions and mix gently, coating all the vegetables with the dressing. Just before serving, add the cilantro and toss to mix.

Line each plate with a romaine leaf and top each leaf with a scoop of the *nopales* mixture. Scatter the cheese evenly over the salads. Serve at once.

Variation Tip: If fresh *nopales* are unavailable, substitute 1 jar (30 oz/940 g) *nopales*, drained and rinsed. Add them after the garlic, onion, and chiles have cooked for 5 minutes.

MAKES 6 SERVINGS



NOPALES

The paddles, or *nopales*, of the prickly pear (or *nopal*) cactus are sold in Mexican markets and many supermarkets, usually with their stickers already removed. They have a flavor that recalls both sorrel and asparagus and are used in salads, side dishes, and with eggs. *Nopales* are easy to prepare: Using a swivel-bladed vegetable peeler or a small paring knife, carefully cut away any stickers and their "eyes." Trim off the entire outer edge of the paddle, including the base end where it was attached to the cactus. A sticky fluid will exude, but will disappear when cooked, or it can be rinsed off.

